

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of  
**Justice**

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

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Kathy O'Hanlon  
Clerk to the Committee for Justice  
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13 January 2026

Dear Kathy,

### **JUSTICE BILL – CRJI/NIA PAPER – RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

Thank you for your letter dated 16 December 2025 regarding the joint paper by Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) that was considered by the Justice Committee at its meeting on 11 December. The issues raised are addressed in turn below.

Members will wish to note that we have discussed this correspondence with both Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) and Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA). While the intention is to expand the use of restorative justice services, and those involved in providing these services, we acknowledge the considerable experience and expertise that both organisations have in this field and view them as key partners in the delivery of services going forward.

#### **Level One Accreditation**

On the issue of level one accreditation, the Departmental letter, dated 5 November 2025, responded to the original query from the Committee which sought reassurance around level one accreditation and NIA/CRJI's views that it could potentially be abused. It stated that, "we would envisage that both Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community



Restorative Justice Ireland (as well as other voluntary sector organisations) will have level one accredited practitioners associated with their organisations". The Department was not suggesting that either organisation would have only or mainly level one practitioners, rather this text was in response to a direct question about level one accreditation from the Committee, and why other levels of accreditation were not specifically referred to. This misunderstanding seems to have fed through to some other concerns raised.

### **Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework**

The paper submitted to the Committee suggests that CRJI and NIA were not consulted as much as the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) in the Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework development, noting that there are eight references to RJC and none to the two local organisations. The references to RJC were in the context of their role as an accreditation body and associated training that is provided.

The RJC was consulted in line with the 2023 Restorative Justice Protocol, which states that, "It is expected that training standards will be in line with those set by the Restorative Justice Council or similar advisory body". In addition, given that the Framework is dealing with a new accreditation process, it would be inappropriate to reference any organisation that is accredited under the current process or is seeking accreditation under the new process.

That said the Department very much values the expertise and experience within both organisations, together with the well-established and valued working relationships with both organisations. The Department has made every effort to ensure ongoing two-way engagement with both organisations as well as others on the Restorative Justice Working Group (RJWG). To this end a first draft Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework was circulated to RJWG members on 21 October 2024, 12 months before its launch, for comment ahead of the November RJWG meeting, at which it was one of the main items on the agenda and was discussed at length. Representatives from both CRJI and NIA were present and members were invited to provide further feedback, via email, to the Department. It was also an agenda item for three subsequent RJWG meetings (March,

June and September 2025), while the new accreditation process was noted at six monthly governance meetings with both organisations.

**Types of cases covered by each accreditation level:** Within the Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework, examples of the case types that *may* fall into each level are given. It notes that in terms of level one that “Most of this work will involve forms of community mediation, and problem solving, for example, resolving neighbourhood disputes, anti-social behaviour or reducing community tensions.” It is important to note that these are examples and do not mean that all cases of this nature will be level one as the paper seems to suggest. The level of any case will be dependent on its particular circumstances. Cases involving paramilitary threats of violence and intimidation, exploitation and coercive control would not automatically fall under level one because of this text.

Similarly in the text outlining work that would fall under level three it states “Cases that require this level of competency ***include, but are not limited to:***

- Matters referred from the Crown Court
- Higher level sexual offences (as outlined in the Gillen Review 2019)
- Domestic abuse (including violence)
- Offences where the person who has been harmed is a child
- Higher level hate crime (as specified in the Marrinan report 2020)
- Higher level public order offences, for example riotous behaviour
- Offences of violence S20 and above
- Loss of life as a result of the offence
- Concern about a specific vulnerability of anyone likely to be involved in the process

Again, it is important to note the text “***include, but are not limited to:***” does not mean that these are the only case types that will fall under level three. The Department is not suggesting that cases involving paramilitary threats, violence, exploitation or coercive control would not require the experience of a level three facilitator. Again, cases at each level would be considered in terms of their particular circumstances.

### **Low uptake of CRNs**

Another issue that was raised in the paper was the perceived lack of a clear plan and oversight arrangements by PSNI to address the previously low uptake of CRNs. The PSNI have provided the following response:

*“The PSNI does not propose to include this Action (as proposed by CRJI and NIA) at this time as the Policing Plan and associated measures have already been agreed. However, crime outcomes and use of out-of-court disposals is measured through existing report cards to the Policing Board.*

*In addition, the Adult Restorative Justice Diversionary Disposal will be assessed and measured through the multi-agency Out-of-Court Disposals group, which is a working group of the Criminal Justice Board, Chaired by the Justice Minister.*

*The PSNI remains committed to working collaboratively with CRJI, NIA and other partners to ensure restorative justice disposals are used appropriately and consistently, and that learning from the pilot is captured through existing governance and engagement mechanisms.”*

### **Pilot areas**

The Department considers that the rationale for this had been explained to the RJWG and was reflected in minutes *“Account has been taken of the likely availability of cases in each area, operational considerations as well as the availability of RJ service provision. While the work being taken forward is to expand service provision there is also a need to reflect on what service provision is currently available. The two areas in which the diversionary pilot will start are adjacent policing districts, where there will often be crossover in terms of staff and training. In addition to this, existing RJ organisations are well placed to work within these areas.”*

Given the large amount of work involved, the Restorative Justice Task and Finish Group was established to focus, in the first instance, on the statutory operational roll out of the

pilot. One of the issues it considered was the initial pilot locations including the potential number of eligible cases within each area, reflecting possible cases from court numbers; operational considerations for both PSNI and PPS such as training and capacity; and the availability of RJ service provision within or near to each area were all considered in addition to other factors. The Task and Finish group reports directly to the RJWG, with recommendations and the rationale behind them shared.

Appendix 2 of the joint paper shows an email highlighting concerns around the pilot areas given that CRJI do not consider that they have an existing presence. Following this, Departmental officials offered to meet with CRJI to discuss and explain the rationale including that an existing presence, while potentially beneficial, will not disadvantage one organisation over another as referrals will be coming through statutory partners (PSNI and PPS) to the Restorative Hub, rather than directly from the local area they are based in to the organisations themselves.

Based on experience from the previous CRN pilot, Central Belfast was not considered operationally feasible by PSNI/PPS in the first instance. The first two areas chosen (Ards and North Down & Lisburn and Castlereagh), and next two (Mid and East Antrim & Antrim and Newtownabbey), were considered the closest policing districts to Belfast. We considered that both organisations have offices in or close to these general areas.

Excluding Belfast itself, these chosen areas will be the closest possible areas to both CRJI and NIA. While we appreciate that organisations may not have these areas on their doorstep as such, the aim was to try and keep within the greater Belfast area and adjacent to this as much as possible in the first instance, where we considered that there would most likely be practitioners. Following further discussions with PSNI and PPS colleagues, it has been agreed that the Derry City and Strabane district will also be included within the second phase roll out.

More generally, in due course, cases will come from across all Northern Ireland by late 2027, which practitioners have been asked to sign up to as part of the new accreditation process.



### **Conclusion**

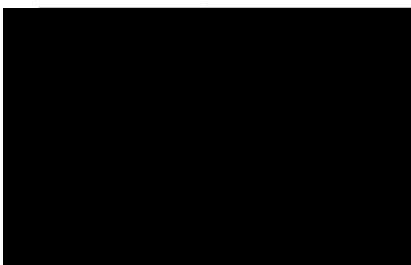
The Department would like to stress that from the outset, RJWG members, which includes practitioners and organisations with decades of experience in restorative justice, have been integral to shaping and developing the Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework, the new accreditation process and the forthcoming pilot. It is also important to note that any work undertaken aligns with the expectations of the 2023 Restorative Justice Protocol.

The Department has always, and will continue, to engage with restorative justice organisations and practitioners, including CRJI and NIA, to draw upon the wealth of expertise, knowledge and experience that exists locally in order to deliver the best service possible.

It is the Department's view that some of the issues highlighted are as a result of a misunderstanding. Departmental officials recently held a productive meeting with the CRJI and NIA Chief Executives to discuss the joint paper that was submitted to the Committee and this response.

I trust this addresses the queries raised by Members. Officials will be happy to provide any further clarification required.

Yours sincerely,



**DALO**



**Northern Ireland Assembly  
Committee for Justice**

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16 December 2025

**Justice Bill – CRJI/NIA paper – Restorative Justice**

Dear ██████████

I refer to the Department's response of 5 November 2025 regarding restorative justice and Community Resolution Notices. The Committee for Justice agreed at its meeting on 13 November to request the views of Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) and Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) on both the Department's response and a response from the PSNI on these matters.

At its meeting on 11 December, the considered a joint paper NIA and CRJI in response to this request. Members noted that NIA and CRJI have raised concerns about the inadequacy of level one accreditation. They have also advised that, while not accredited by the Department of Justice, the UK Restorative Justice Council has been cited as a source of experience, guidance and authority, but neither NIA nor CRJI as local accredited bodies have been mentioned as sources of local authority.

The Committee agreed to forward the joint paper to the Department to ask for a response to the key issues raised by NIA and CRJI, including in respect of these two particular matters.

I would appreciate a response by 8 January 2025.

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Yours sincerely

*Kathy O'Hanlon*

**Kathy O'Hanlon**  
**Clerk to the Committee for Justice**

Enc: NIA and CRJI Justice Bill response

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